The Future of the Book is the Future of Society

The Future of the Book

As someone who made the leap from print to electronic publishing over thirty years ago people often ask me to expound on the “future of the book.” Frankly, I can’t stand the question, especially when asked simplistically. For starters it needs more specificity. Are we talking two years, ten years or one-hundred years? And what does the questioner mean by “book” anyway? Are they asking about the evolution of the physical object or its role in the social fabric?

It’s a long story but over the past thirty years my definition of “book” has undergone a major shift. At the beginning I simply defined a book in terms of its physical nature — paper pages infused with ink, bound into what we know as the codex. But then in the late 1970s with the advent of new media technologies we began to see the possibility of extending the notion of the page to include audio and video, imagining books with audio and video components. To make this work conceptually, we started defining books not in terms of their physical components but how they are used. From this perspective a book isn’t ink on bound paper, but rather “a user-driven medium” where the reader is in complete control of how they access the contents. With laser videodiscs and then cd-roms users/readers started “reading” motion pictures; transforming the traditionally producer-driven experience where the user simply sat in a chair with no control of pace or sequence into a fully user-driven medium.

This definition worked up through the era of the laser videodisc and the cd-rom, but completely fell apart with the rise of the internet. Without an “object” to tie it to, I started to talk about a book as the vehicle humans use to move ideas around time and space.

People often expressed opposition to my freewheeling license with definitions but I learned to push back, explaining that it may take decades, maybe even a century for stable new modes of expression and the words to describe them to emerge. For now I argued, it’s better to continuously redefine the definition of “book” until something else clearly takes its place.

A Book is a Place

In 2005 when the U.S. based Macarthur Foundation gave me a grant to explore how publishing might evolve as it moves from the printed page to the networked screen I used the money to found what I playfully named The Institute for the Future of the Book. With a group of young people, just out of university and coming of age in the era of the social web, we carried out a number of experiments under the rubric of "networked books."

This was the moment of the blog and we wondered what would happen if we applied the concept of "reader comments" to essays and books. Our first attempt, McKenzie Wark's Gamer Theory, turned out to be a remarkably lucky choice. The book's structure — numbered paragraphs rather than numbered pages — required my colleagues to come up with an innovative design allowing readers to make comments at the level of the paragraph rather than the page. Their solution to what at the time seemed like a simple graphical UI problem, was to put the comments to the right of each of Wark's paragraphs rather than follow the standard practice of placing them underneath the author's text.

Within a few hours of putting *Gamer Theory* online, a vibrant discussion emerged in the margins. We realized that moving comments from the bottom to the side, a change that at the time seemed minor, in fact had profound implications. Largely because Wark took a very active role in the unfolding discussion, our understanding at first focused on the ways in which this new format upends the traditional hierarchies of print which place the author on a pedestal and the reader at her adoring feet. With the side-by-side layout of *Gamer Theory*'s text and comments, author and reader were suddenly occupying the same visual space; which in turn shifted their relationship to one of much greater equality. As the days went by it became clear that author and reader were engaged in a collaborative effort to increase their collective understanding.

We started to talk about "a book as a place" where people congregate to hash out their thoughts and ideas.

Later experiments in classrooms and reading groups were just as successful even though no author was involved, leading us to realize we were witnessing much more than a shift in the relationship between author and reader.

The reification of ideas into printed, persistent objects obscures the social aspect of both reading and writing, so much so, that our culture portrays them as among the most solitary of behaviors. This is because the social aspect traditionally takes place outside the pages — around the water cooler, at the dinner table and on the pages of other publications in the form of reviews or references and bibliographies. In that light, moving texts from page to screen doesn't make them social so much as it allows the social components to come forward and to multiply in value.

And once you've engaged in a social reading experience the value is obvious. Contemporary problems are sufficiently complex that individuals can rarely understand them on their own. More eyes, more minds collaborating on the task of understanding will yield better, more comprehensive answers.

Our grandchildren will assume that reading with others, i.e. social reading, is the "natural" way to read. They will be amazed to realize that in our day reading was something one did alone. Reading by one's self will seem as antiquated as silent movies are to us.

The difficult thing however about predicting the future of reading is that everything i've said so far presumes that what is being read is an "n-page" article or essay or an "n-page," "n-chapter" book," when realistically, the forms of expression will change dramatically as we learn to exploit the unique affordances of new electronic media. Ideally, the boundaries between reading and writing will become ever more porous as readers take a more active role in the production of knowledge and ideas.

Clemens Setz, the author of the literary novel Indigo watched the conversation unfold as 40 students in a class at Hildesheim University outside Berlin carried out an extensive conversation with over 1800 comments. At a recent symposium Setz said that knowing his readers would be playing an active role in the margin will effect how he writes; he'll make room for their participation.

Follow the Gamers

And lest, you think this shift applies only to non-fiction, please consider huge multi-player games such as World of Warcraft as a strand of future-

fiction where the author describes a world and the players/readers write the narrative as they play the game.

Although we date the “age of print” from 1454, more than two hundred years passed before the “novel” emerged as a recognizable form. Newspapers and magazines took even longer to arrive on the scene. Just as Gutenberg and his fellow printers started by reproducing illustrated manuscripts, contemporary publishers have been moving their printed texts to electronic screens. This shift will bring valuable benefits (searchable text, personal portable libraries, access via internet download, etc.), but this phase in the history of publishing will be transitional. Over time new media technologies will give rise to new forms of expression yet to be invented that will come to dominate the media landscape in decades and centuries to come.

My instinct is that game makers, who, unlike publishers, have no legacy product to hold them, back will be at the forefront of this transformation. Multimedia is already their language, and game-makers are making brilliant advances in the building of thriving, million-player communities. As conventional publishers prayerfully port their print to tablets, game-makers will embrace the immense promise of networked devices and both invent and define the dominant modes of expression for centuries to come.

The Future of the Book is the Future of Society

“The medium, or process, of our time — electric technology — is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life.

It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing: you, your family, your education, your neighborhood, your job, your government, your relation to “the others. And they’re changing dramatically.” Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*

Following McLuhan and his mentor Harold Innis, a persuasive case can be made that print played the key role in the rise of the nation state and capitalism, and also in the development of our notions of privacy and the primary focus on the individual over the collective. Social reading experiments and massive multi-player games are baby steps in the shift to

a networked culture. Over the course of the next two or three centuries new modes of communication will usher in new ways of organizing society, completely changing our understanding of what it means to be human.